THE CHILD WITHOUT A HALO — WHAT IS THIS IMAGE TELLING US?

In the light of *Redemptoris Mater*

For a long time I have been intrigued by the following: whenever I pause before the image of **"Most Holy Mary, Mother of Divine Providence"** (*Mater Divinae Providentiae*), attributed to **Scipione Pulzone**—an artist associated with Rome's post-Tridentine artistic milieu—I notice the absence of a halo around the head of the Christ Child. [1] At first glance everything seems "as it should be": Mary's face is serene and tender, the composition simple and clear—designed not to distract, but to lead into prayer. Only after a moment do you perceive the detail: Mary bears a delicate nimbus (halo), while the Child Jesus does not.

Someone might ask, "Is this a mistake?" Yet in sacred art, the halo is not an "obligatory label of holiness," but a language. Sometimes that language speaks directly (the golden circle); at other times it is discreet, speaking through light, gesture, gaze, and silence. After the Council of Trent, images with an immediately intelligible message—capable of awakening devotion without excess or theatricality—were especially valued; Pulzone is often

described
precisely in this key, as an artist of clear forms ordered toward prayerful legibility. [2]

The deepest answer, however, emerges when one contemplates the painting not only with the eyes of an aesthete, but with the eyes of a disciple: as if "from within" the Gospel—and in the light of what Saint John Paul II wrote in the encyclical **"Redemptoris Mater."** [3]

The Pope leads us to Golgotha—to the moment he explicitly calls a "testament from the Cross." There, Jesus says to Mary,

"Woman, behold your son," and to the beloved disciple, "Behold your mother." [4] John Paul II emphasizes that this is not merely a gesture of care for his Mother, but the establishment of a new bond and a new motherhood of Mary: from that moment Mary is "given" to the disciples—each and all—as Mother. [3]

Here, a key point appears, especially close to interpretations focused on the "absence of a halo." The Pope notes that the words spoken from the Cross are addressed in the singular—to one person. This is not incidental, but a sign that Mary's motherhood is personal: it touches a concrete "you," not only an anonymous crowd of believers. [3]

That is why Christian tradition so often repeats: every disciple can stand in John's place; every believer can hear within, "Behold your mother"—and can "take her into his own home." [3]

In this perspective, the image begins to "speak" differently. The Child without a halo need not imply any diminishment of his holiness. On the contrary, it can be an invitation to recognize, within the scene, one's own childship—the place prepared for the disciple whom Jesus entrusts to his Mother. As the interpretation recalled here suggests, the artist may have deliberately left room for each person to recognize himself or herself as a child entrusted to Mary. The halo-less Child becomes, in a certain sense, a "place" for you and me: for the one who receives the gift of Mary's motherhood.

This leads directly to what John Paul II calls spiritual motherhood "in the order of grace": it springs from the Paschal mystery and remains linked to the gift of the Holy Spirit—because it is the Spirit who makes us new children of God, redeemed in Christ. [3]

Mary, then, is not a "substitute Mother" alongside God, but Mother in this sense: in the plan of salvation, she helps us welcome the life of grace; she leads to Christ, teaches faith and consent to God's will—just as she herself learned this throughout her whole journey. [3]

Then the absence of a halo becomes not a "lack" but a message: the holiness of Jesus does not need a sign, because it is revealed in love that stoops low—in nearness, tenderness, and self-giving. And Mary—Mother of Divine Providence—looks upon the Child with such delicacy, as if to say: "This is not only a scene from two thousand years ago. It is the story of the Church. It is also your story."

Perhaps that is why this image moves the heart so powerfully: it

leads to the act spoken of in the encyclical—to “take Mary into one’s own home.” [3] That is, to allow her maternal presence in the order of grace to become something real: in prayer, in daily life, in choices.

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Sources

[1] https://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/scheda/opera/32149/Pulzone%20Scipione%2C%20Madonna%20con%20Bambino

[2] https://www.collezionegalleriaborghese.it/opere/madonna-con-bambino-9

[3] https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/pl/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html

[4] (John 19:26–27 – online text) https://biblia.deon.pl/rozdzial.php?id=358